

# I. The New Context of German Studies

## Overview

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The authors of the three essays in this section describe a crisis afflicting the practice of German Studies in today's universities. While each author is mainly concerned to discuss their own national context - Patricia Herminghouse focuses on the situation in the United States, Tim Mehigan discusses the Australian situation, while Thomas Pekar offers a comparative discussion of German and Japanese universities - the emergence of a general crisis affecting German Studies throughout the world must now be taken as given.

The authors divine various reasons for this global crisis of German Studies. For Herminghouse, who begins by considering the impact of legislation affecting the teaching of languages after the Second World War at the beginning of the "post-Sputnik era," German Studies in the United States has been forced to meet the challenge of one set of exigencies after another over a long period. If the need to advance the speaking ability of Americans by making use of new technology arose in response to political imperatives in the Cold War environment of the sixties, it was economic imperatives that were dominant from the 1970s on. These imperatives required universities to equip graduates with concrete skills that would serve them in the market place. Indeed, the rise of a multi-disciplinary model of "German Studies" in the United States at this time was a direct response to the need to contribute an economically competitive advantage to "the national interest." Herminghouse makes clear that traditional departments of German had to find adequate responses to this so-called national interest, or go under. In the 1980s and 1990s, a more sophisticated understanding of the factors underpinning market competitiveness has emerged. This more culturally informed idea of what makes for competitiveness in the market place is the new "ghost in the machine" that underlies the situation in all the countries under discussion.

As the three contributors in this section point out, the arrival of “cultural studies” in the university has fundamentally changed the situation of language teaching and learning. Yet whether cultural studies can lay claim to a real content, and whether it is anything more than a methodology, a new way of approaching the study of literature and texts, remains unclear. At any rate, a reflection on the significance of its incursion into the foreign language curriculum appears paramount. As the three authors in this section indicate, the rise of the Anglophone notion of cultural studies from the 1950s can be variously explained. One explanation for the success of a more class-sensitive notion of cultural awareness - the lynchpin of the English model of cultural studies - appears to lie with recent answers to the question of what makes for successful selling in the international market place. As Pekar notes about Japan, a country that rebuilt itself in the postwar era on the back of international trade, both a general sensitivity to the notion of culture as such and a specific understanding of the foreign culture of the trading partner are considered important. In the globally focused world of the 1990s and 2000s, then, notions of culture both high and low, elite and popular have not only become firmly established, they are now also entrenched. As a result, the teaching and learning of foreign languages in our universities cannot but take account of old and new ideas of culture and the need to make curricula and programmes respond to them. Therefore, however this interest in the importance of culture has come about, and notwithstanding the cost to the sovereignty of older ideas that used to govern foreign language offerings in the university setting, practitioners of German Studies across the world, including those who teach literature and culture in Germany, have had to address the challenge of cultural studies as a phenomenon. This, then, is the underlying situation of “interdisciplinarity” on which the three authors in this section reflect from their varying standpoints.

For Mehigan, this new situation would appear to make the case for a refocused German Studies that highlights the German contribution to the compendium of dominant cultural ideas in the world today, as well as a general upskilling of teachers to meet the demands of a revitalised, culturally more rigorous, language curriculum. Such a change suggests that

German departments should pursue a more expansive notion of their discipline in order to regain territory ceded to other departments in the wake of the emergence of cultural studies. Concomitantly, the need to counteract the perception that language departments lack intellectuality with respect to other areas of the university has, he believes, become urgent. This perception has arisen where language departments expend most of their energy on imparting language instruction. The sense of diminished intellectuality is the political factor in many universities underlying the erosion of disciplinary identity in German Studies.

Pekar goes further by offering intellectual models that would serve the goal of the refocusing and upskilling that Mehigan argues for. He refers to the linguistically based cultural theories of Els Oksaar and the semiotics of Roland Barthes in suggesting ways in which the communicative situation in foreign language learning could be enhanced and the cultural dimensions of communication better understood. Herminghouse, for her part, points out the dangers of overcompensation, as language scholars, following new notions of interdisciplinarity, attempt to return to long abandoned cognate areas of history, politics, media studies, and literature. Dilettantism is no solution where real expertise is called for. Accordingly, she urges that such a return not take place willy-nilly, but only on the basis of what is academically justifiable.

Pekar's discussion of an enriched notion of communication owes much to the methodological discussion about the literary tradition of "Germanistik" currently taking place in Germany. While it is common to separate the study of German culture and language outside Germany- "Auslandsgermanistik" (or what Pekar and others capitalise as German Studies) - from this same study within Germany, which is thought to pursue different ends, such a distinction is not easily maintained. In part, this may be read into the difficulties attending the canonising of the texts and text types held to evince cultural content as the move in Germany toward a new culturally based German studies is negotiated. These difficulties have been reproduced, perhaps on a smaller scale, in discussions outside Germany about the merits of "nationally" focused German Studies. A line of separation between "German Studies" and "Germanistik"

would also appear to be questionable in view of the entry into Germany of the Anglophone version of cultural studies with its attendant presuppositions. How far this model of cultural studies can be applied to the German situation is one of the many issues that await resolution in the debate in Germany. Moreover, as Pekar argues, it is not yet clear if this debate represents anything more than a rehearsal of the older civilisation-culture debate of the early part of the twentieth century. In this older debate, the socially progressive dimensions of culture as an idea were considered separate from the ideological commitments of the Western model of civilisation. Clearly the debate about cultural studies, along with many others like it, is far from settled.